

Kevin Diaz, *Star Tribune*

WASHINGTON - Call it the water system to nowhere.

For towns like Worthington, in southwestern Minnesota, a new congressional ban on "earmarks," which could dry up funding for the Lewis and Clark regional water co-op, would be the worst-case scenario.

Much like the Central Corridor light-rail line in Minneapolis and St. Paul, the project's federal funding suddenly is threatened by a post-election spending calculus in Washington, where congressional largesse now is viewed with disfavor by ascendant conservative lawmakers -- and by the Obama White House.

U.S. House Republicans voted Thursday to extend a ban on earmarks for two years, triggering headaches for state and local officials.

At least \$100 million in Minnesota projects hang in the balance for this fiscal year, including \$2 million for the Minnesota National Guard's "Beyond the Yellow Ribbon" reintegration program for returning vets.

But none matches the scope of the Central Corridor rail line and the multi-state Lewis and Clark project, a massive, \$542 million waterworks that will pipe safe drinking water from the Missouri River aquifer to hundreds of thousands of residents in drought-prone towns like Worthington and spur businesses like the 2,500-employee Swift pork processing plant.

Losing the project "would be devastating," said Troy Larson, executive director of the Lewis and Clark Regional Water System, which Congress authorized a decade ago to serve the dry prairies of western Minnesota, eastern South Dakota and northern Iowa. Among the project's champions are fiscal conservatives like U.S. Rep Steve King, R-Iowa. Local communities in the tri-state area have already ponied up \$153 million.

Shutting off the spigot on the partially completed project would create a "water system to nowhere," said Larson, invoking Alaska's so-called "Bridge to Nowhere," which became a symbol of wasteful pork-barrel spending. Funding for Lewis and Clark, Central Corridor and other projects is contained in the \$1.1 trillion omnibus spending bill that Democratic leaders had hoped to get through the current lame-duck session of Congress.

That bill is now entangled in the detritus of midterm elections, which were marked by the Tea Party's resentment of government spending.

"The American people just flat spoke out against big-time spending and debt," said Rep. John Kline, R-Minn., one of the first members of Congress to refuse earmarks before the idea was popular.

A majority of Republicans and some Democrats instead favor a stop-gap spending measure that would fund the government into next year at current levels. That would scrap money for lawmakers' pet projects.

There are at least \$3 billion in projects written into the dozen appropriations bills that make up the 2011 omnibus package. They include at least \$2 million for the Lewis and Clark project, and \$45 million for the Central Corridor.

"It's gonna hurt. It's going to be very painful," said Rep. Keith Ellison, D-Minn.

Earmark critics like Kline say it is not the projects they object to, but rather the "spoils" system by which the money is allocated in Congress. "They're based on all the wrong things," Kline said. "Seniority, committee assignments, who you know, what deal you've cut."

Kline argues that meritorious projects can go through the regular federal budget process without resorting to congressional earmarks.

That's the hope, at least, for officials trying to salvage funding for projects like the Central Corridor line that would connect the Twin Cities.

"We don't know how the Congress will work its magic, but we hope and believe it will approve the funding one way or the other," said Metropolitan Council spokesman Steve Dornfeld.

The Central Corridor project awaits a funding agreement with the Federal Transit Administration. The agency has vetted the rail line and is expected to ink a deal that would have Washington pick up half of the \$957 million price tag.

"We don't really regard Central Corridor as an earmark in the sense of some political project that was plucked out of nowhere and inserted into an appropriations bill," Dornfeld said.

Democratic U.S. Rep. Betty McCollum, who helped shepherd the rail line through the appropriations process, fired back at Republicans like Kline who signed a letter last month calling for the elimination of all earmarks, including the Central Corridor.

Such a ban, McCollum said, would "cripple" vital jobs and infrastructure projects like Central Corridor.

Earmarks as 'local control'

McCollum argues that earmarks, which account for less than 1 percent of the budget, represent a critical element of local control over spending decisions that would otherwise be made by bureaucrats, with even less transparency.

It's not always a partisan issue. Alaska Sen. Lisa Murkowski, a Republican who survived a tough race against a Tea Party-backed challenger, argues that the assault on earmarks is "about messaging" and that critics aren't being "straight with the public."

Often presented as a curb on spending, earmarks do not necessarily add to the deficit. Many of them represent the congressional allocation of previously budgeted dollars.

"To those who want a moratorium, I say you've saved exactly zero," said Rep. Tim Walz, D-Minn., who helped earmark millions of dollars in recent years for the Lewis and Clark project in his district.

Walz, along with Sen. Amy Klobuchar and others, met recently with White House budget officials to plead for funding in the president's budget -- a means of securing money without resorting to earmarks.

"The irony of this is that by asking for the moratorium," Walz said, "this makes President Obama stronger."